Lafayette Historical Society NEWS Enlightening Our Community

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

CONNECTING ALAMEDA AND CONTRA COSTA COUNTIES: Part 1, The Kennedy Tunnel

Before the Mexicans, the Spanish, and the Yankee settlers arrived in the East Bay, the native people followed paths and trails over the hills between present day Alameda and Contra Costa counties. These paths generally followed the stream and creek beds of the area. Natives used the trails for hunting, gathering plants, and trading with other tribes of the East Bay and Marin County.

Early settlers on horseback or with horse drawn wagons or buggies used trails and primitive roads to cross the hills. Although the first roads were little more than dirt trails, Contra Costa County was divided into road districts as early as July of 1850 and a few main roads were declared public highways. Once roads had been established, people could travel more frequently between the counties. Farmers from Contra Costa County brought their agricultural goods to Alameda County to sell at the produce marts.

For years, crossing over the hills using Fish Ranch Road was possible only on foot, on horseback, or using a horse-drawn carriage. The road was so steep, winding, and often rutted that horses had to be led or pushed to reach the summit. In 1859 the Alta Telegraph Company constructed a telegraph line between Oakland and Martinez, and the existing road that ran alongside it was renamed Telegraph Road. The segment of the road that ran from downtown Oakland to the Peralta Estate in Temescal was first known as Peralta Road.

The road from Berkeley followed the present-day Telegraph Avenue and connected with Claremont Avenue and then went over the hills following the approximate path of today's Fish Ranch Road.

Farmers of Contra Costa County used horses and wagons to carry their agricultural products over

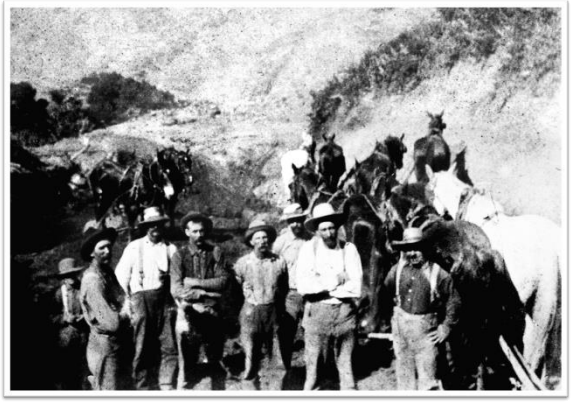
the hills to sell in Alameda County. Summit House was a stopping place that stood at the top of Fish Ranch Road in the late 1880s. Those traveling between Alameda and Contra Costa Counties could stop here to change horses, have a meal, or spend the night.

In the late 1880s, trips over the hills went up Claremont Avenue to the summit. After the long climb, the downgrade to the east ended at the Oakland Trout Company where there was a small saloon, large stables, and a stage stop near the road. The road became known as Fish Ranch Road because of the fish and frog farm located there.

There was an interest in building a tunnel between the two counties as early as 1860 but the idea was initially rejected by citizens of both counties. The project would be too costly, and a route could not be agreed on so these initial efforts to build a tunnel were abandoned. The idea of digging a tunnel was revived in the 1890s when money from the two counties and funding from private citizens financed a new tunnel. The route would run from the end of Broadway following the route of today's Caldecott Tunnel. The proposed tunnel would be about 500 feet long and would exit on the southern side of the San Pablo Creek watershed with a road leading into Lafayette. A franchise was granted to a group of developers who passed the franchise on to another group. The proposal stalled until the turn of the century. In 1903 a tunnel was finally built above the current location of the Caldecott Tunnel in the next canyon south of Claremont Canyon. This tunnel was approached by a new road called Tunnel Road which started at the top of Ashby Avenue in Berkeley. The tunnel was called the Broadway Tunnel for the road that accessed it or the Kennedy Tunnel for the old toll road and the local farm near the west portal. It was located 320 feet below the summit and was 1,040 feet long, 17 feet wide, and built with timber supports. It could barely accommodate two-way traffic.

William Buckley's house was located near Tunnel Road on the east side of the tunnel. A barbecue was held there in May 1897 attended by representatives from Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. Subscriptions were sold to fund the construction of a new tunnel. This house was torn down in 1935 to make room for the east portal of the Broadway Low Level Tunnel.

The cost of construction was to be shared by both counties but when a survey showed that three-fifths of the work was to be in Contra Costa County, Alameda County refused to pay for work that was not in its jurisdiction. The Merchant Exchange of Oakland raised the needed $15,000 so the project could continue.



Workers had to climb steep hills to the tunnel site, where they excavated using picks and shovels.

Horses pulled carts on rails to haul out the dirt. Day laborers did the work on the Contra Costa County side; Alameda County hired a contractor to do the work.

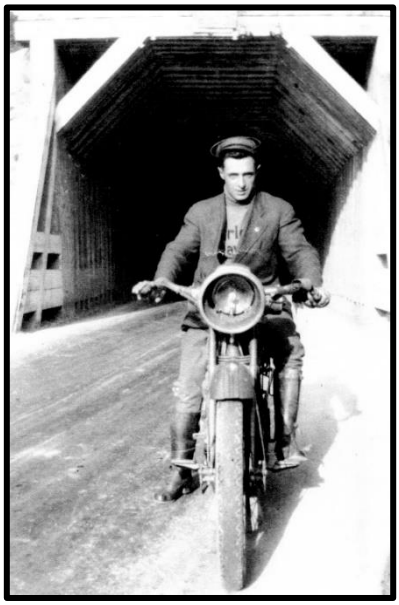
Opening ceremonies for the tunnel were attended by dignitaries from both counties. Although the bore had been completed, the tunnel was unpaved, unlit, and prone to mudslides. The approaches to the tunnel (Old Tunnel Road to the west and Fish Ranch Road to the east) involved steep roads with many hairpin turns and dangerous cliffs, making the route difficult for four- and six-horse teams to traverse.

Large hay wagons, which could carry as much as two tons of hay, were sometimes too tall or wide for two-way traffic travelling through the tunnel. Drivers on either end of the tunnel would light rolled-up newspapers or hold up lanterns to signal drivers on the other end to wait for them to pass through.

Electricity became available in 1914 and lights were installed in the tunnel, while light poles were added outside. Workers changed light bulbs by standing atop hay wagons as they traveled through the tunnel.

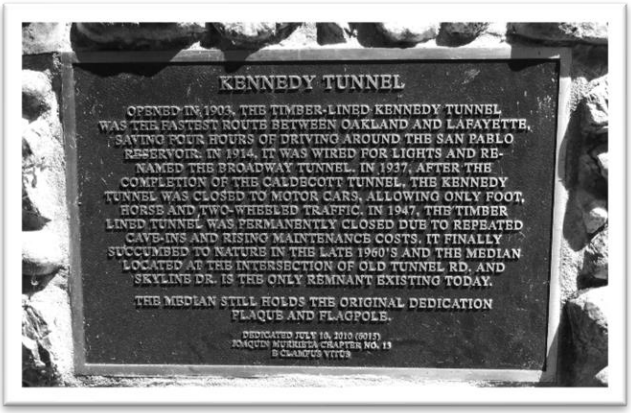
There was a $300 surplus from the money raised by subscriptions for the construction of the tunnel. All attempts to spend it on anything else were blocked so the money sat in a trust fund for 30 years and grew to $900. The money was later used to purchase a triangular plot of ground in front of the Oakland portal upon which a flagpole and a marker were erected.

After the installation of electric lights in the tunnel in 1914, Frank Enos made a deal with the power company and tended the lights in the tunnel in exchange for the lights at the Canary Cottage. The walls of the tunnel were initially whitewashed for improved visibility.



Ernest Guido, secretary of the Oakland Motorcycle Club, is shown on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle at the Kennedy Tunnel in 1917. Two months before this photo was taken, the United States entered World War I. Corporal Guido was drafted and served in France where he was killed in action at the front in September 1918.

By the early 1930s, more than 4,000 vehicles traveled through the narrow tunnel each day on a faster and safer route between Alameda and Contra Costa Counties that offered easier access to San Francisco.


KENNEDY TUNNEL
OPENED IN 1903, THE TIMBER-LINED KENNEDY TUNNEL WAS THE FASTEST ROUTE BETWEEN OAKLAND AND LAFAYETTE, SAVING FOUR HOURS OF DRIVING AROUND THE SAN PABLO RESERVOIR. IN 1914, IT WAS WIRED FOR LIGHTS AND RE-NAMED THE BROADWAY TUNNEL. IN 1937, AFTER THE COMPLETION OF THE CALDECOTT TUNNEL, THE KENNEDY TUNNEL WAS CLOSED TO MOTOR CARS, ALLOWING ONLY FOOT, HORSE AND TWO-WHEELED TRAFFIC. IN 1947, THE TIMBER LINED TUNNEL WAS PERMANENTLY CLOSED DUE TO REPEATED CAVE-INS AND RISING MAINTENANCE COSTS. IT FINALLY SUCCUMBED TO NATURE IN THE LATE 1960'S AND THE MEDIAN LOCATED AT THE INTERSECTION OF OLD TUNNEL RD. AND SKYLINE DR. IS THE ONLY REMNANT EXISTING TODAY.
THE MEDIAN STILL HOLDS THE ORIGINAL DEDICATION PLAQUE AND FLAGPOLE.

The last remaining piece of the Kennedy Tunnel is this marker, located near Tunnel Road, close to the west portal above the current Caldecott Tunnel. The old tunnel was closed to traffic in 1937 and used to store munitions during World War II. It collapsed in 1948 and was filled in to provide for public safety.

Part 2: The Broadway Low Level Tunnel in the October issue.

GEORGE WASSON

The Historical Society and the City of Lafayette recently lost a long time resident and valuable member of our community when George Wasson passed away at 100 ½ years of age.

George was born in New York state in 1923. Both his mother and father were engineers for General Electric Company. He grew up in what is now Havertown, Pennsylvania, in suburban Philadelphia. He graduated from high school in 1941 and entered Purdue University. He was drafted into the Navy in 1943. After several months he ended up in Radio Material School on Treasure Island, San Francisco. He was assigned to the USS Wasatch AGC 9 and eventually was a First Class Petty Officer Radio Technician.

George returned to Purdue and graduated in 1948 with a degree in Electrical Engineering. He accepted a job in Detroit and enrolled at the University of Detroit in the afternoon law school. He graduated and passed the Michigan Bar Exam in 1952. In 1954 he became a Registered Patent Attorney to practice in the U.S. Patent Office.

While in law school he met June Murphy and they were married in 1952. George accepted a job in 1957 with the California Research Corporation (Standard Oil of California, Chevron Corporation) and moved to Lafayette in 1957. He passed the California Bar that year. He retired from Chevron in 1983 as a Senior Patent Attorney and started a small practice of Intellectual Property Law.

During a conversation with a friend he was introduced to the Lafayette Improvement Association (LIA), an association representing many local organizations which functioned as a pseudo city government before incorporation. George later joined the board and served as President. When Lafayette was considering incorporation in 1968, he became active in that effort and was a candidate (one of twenty) for City Council.

In 1974 he again was a candidate and was elected to City Council, serving as Mayor in 1976. During this time Lafayette acquired the city's historic first motorized fire engine, known as Old Betsy. When someone asked who would drive her, George volunteered. He later became an early member of the Lafayette Historical Society and served as President. He became the unofficial custodian of Old Betsy. Although she is owned by the City, LHS is charged with her restoration and maintenance. After many years in George's garage and lots of efforts by the citizens of Lafayette, Old Betsy has been restored and has her own space at the Lafayette Library.....thanks in great part to George!! He will be missed.

ORAL HISTORIES

Oral Histories which date from the 1970's have been stored on tapes and discs in the History Room. Many of these tapes have recently been digitized and are available for viewing on the Historical Society Website – lafayettehistory.org. In the top row on the web page you will find Archives/Oral Histories which will take you to the oral histories. Below are several of the oral histories that have recently been added to the website. The committee continues to work to make additional tapes available.

<u>Millicent Hamburger</u>: In 1941, the principal of the new Acalanes High School hired Millicent Hamburger, a trained and talented dance instructor from New York City, to be an English teacher and to establish a dance program for interested students. She would go on to inspire and direct the Acalanes Dance Group for 30 years, after which she returned to New York. Then for another 30 years she met annually with a group of former students for a reunion dance program. Her book about the Acalanes Dance Group, "When I Dance" inspired Sandra Bagnall to write and direct this 2002 video about this remarkable teacher and her students.

<u>Chuck Bauman</u>: Chuck Baumann was interviewed in March, 2024. He came to Lafayette in 1955 at age 6 when his father relocated the family to this growing community to establish and run a company that built swimming pools. He discusses growing up in the community with great schools and social activities. He worked for his father from a young age. Two of Chuck's uncles also ran pool companies, and he worked for them until he founded his own firm in 1977. Soon the Jacuzzi family gave him the opportunity to build the first combination pool and heated spa in Upper Happy Valley. When he eventually retired his son took over the business.

Lafayette Historical Society
PO Box 133, Lafayette Ca 94549
925-385-2297
www.lafayettehistory.org

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MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2024

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

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Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.

Student Membership: $15 ~ Individual Membership: $30 ~ Family Membership: $60